

The Hijras of Odisha: A Study of the Self-Identity of the Eunuchs and Their Identification with Stereotypical Feminine Roles

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Abstract : Background of the study: In the background of the passage of the Transgender Bill 2016, which is the first such step of formal recognition of the rights of transgender, the Hijras have been recognized under the wider definition of Transgender. Fascinatingly, in the Hindu social context, Hijras have a long social standing during marriages and childbirths. Other than this ironically, they live an ostracized life. The Bill rather than recognizing their unique characteristics and needs, reinforces the societal dualism through a parallelism of their legal rights with rights available to women. Purpose of the paper: The research objective was to probe why and to what extent did they identify themselves with the feminine gender roles. Originality of the paper: In the Indian context, the subject of eunuch has received relatively little attention. Among the studies that exist, there has been a preponderance of studies from the perspective of social exclusion, rights, and physical health. There has been an absence of research studying the self-identity of Hijras from the gender perspective. Methodology: The paper adopts the grounded theory method to investigate and discuss the underlying gender identity of transgenders. Participants in the study were 30 hijras from various parts of Odisha. 4 Focus group discussions were held for collecting data. The participants were approached in their natural habitat. Following the methodological recommendations of the grounded theory, care was taken to select respondents with varying experiences. The recorded discourses were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed sentence by sentence, and coded. Common themes were identified, and responses were categorized under the themes. Data collected in the latter group discussions were added till saturation of themes. Finally, the themes were put together to prove that despite the demand for recognition as third gender, the eunuchs of Odisha identify themselves with the feminine roles. Findings: The Hijra have their own social structure and norms which are unique and are in contrast with the mainstream culture. These eunuchs live and reside in KOTHIS (house), where the family is led by a matriarch addressed as Maa (mother) with her daughters (the daughters are eunuchs/effeminate men castrated and not castrated). They all dress up as woman, do womanly duties, expect to be considered and recognized as woman and wife and have the behavioral traits of a woman. Looking from the stance of Feminism one argues that when the Hijras identify themselves with the gender woman then on what grounds they are given the recognition as third gender. As self-identified woman; their claim for recognition as third gender falls flat. Significance of the study: Academically it extends the study of understanding of gender identity and psychology of the Hijras in the Indian context. Practically its significance is far reaching. The findings can be used to address legal and social issues with regards to the rights available to the Hijras.

Keywords : feminism, gender perspective, Hijras, rights, self-identity

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